

MARGARET PETERSON  
**HADDIX**

*New York Times* Bestselling Author



THE MISSING  
**SOUGHT**

Rewriting the past to save the future



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Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers  
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

So this kid calls me, totally out of the blue. It's early morning, before school, and my mom would tell you that I should have been busy figuring out which pile of clothes my purple Converse were under and whatever happened to the math homework I did last night. (Well, I did half of it. Maybe a fourth. I never was good with fractions.)

Technically I guess I'm kind of exaggerating about the kid calling *me*. It's the house phone that rings—the old-fashioned landline that my old-fashioned parents think they still have to have hooked up or, I don't know, the world as we know it might end. But who can resist a ringing phone? I pick it up in the upstairs hallway as I walk past after brushing my teeth. I'm thinking it's going to be someone selling windows or siding or something boring like that, and I always feel like it's my duty to give people like that a wacky conversation so they have *something* interesting to tell their families when they get home from work.

One time I convinced a magazine salesman that I had a pet squirrel named Lulubelle whose life was so endangered by living in the same cage as my giant guinea pig, Nebuchadnezzar, that the guy called the SPCA.

My mom was *not* happy when the county animal control officer showed up at our front door.

But anyhow, answering the phone, all I'm thinking about is making up a good prank, one I haven't used before.

*If I can convince the window/siding/whatever salesman I'm my mom—if he calls me "Mrs. McCarthy" and everything—then . . .*

"Hello?" I say. It comes out sounding odd, because I'm still trying to decide whether I want to use a fake accent. British? French? Of course, Australian is always fun. . . .

"Uh, hello," the voice on the other end of the line says. "Uh, Daniella?"

Okay, this is weird. Nobody ever calls *me* on the landline—that's what my cell phone is for. And it's a kid, not some friend of Mom's who might know me. If I had to guess, I'd say it's a kid about my age (thirteen), because, you know that weird thing a boy's voice starts doing in middle school? Where it's low, then high, then low, then high, and you can tell the boy's just dying of embarrassment if he has to say more than two

syllables? (If I were a boy, I would so totally use that to make everyone laugh all day long. I wouldn't be embarrassed at all. It'd be fun.)

That's what this boy's voice is doing—the roller coaster of pitches—but somehow it doesn't seem funny right now.

Maybe this is crazy, but what this boy's voice makes me picture is someone with a gun to his head. Like—he's that worried and stressed.

And right here is where I say nobody in their right mind would call me if they had a gun to their head. You call me for knock-knock jokes. You call me to borrow whoopee cushions and fake vomit for April Fools' Day. Matters of life and death? Not my specialty. If I were around someone in danger, the only way I'd ever manage to save them is if I tripped and accidentally knocked the gun out of the killer's hand.

"Yes?" I say, and there's an edge to my voice, because I really don't like thinking that this boy might be in danger and counting on me for any sort of help.

"Um . . . you still live in Ann Arbor?" the boy says.

Okay, *that* wasn't what I was expecting. I actually pull the phone back from my ear and give it a baffled look.

"Where else would I live?" I ask when I bring the phone back against my head.

"Uh, Liston, Ohio?" the boy says. "Or maybe Upper Tyson or Clarksville, but that's not as likely—are you sure you aren't moving or planning to move or in the process of—?"

"No," I say.

This isn't so funny now. There's no prank I can turn this into, because the boy's voice is so urgent and distressed about where I live. Does he think there's something dangerous about Ann Arbor? (What—am I going to be attacked by white picket fences? Or people's perfect yards? Maybe a single blade of crabgrass?)

Or is it those other three cities—in Ohio?—that are dangerous? What were they again? Istan, Upper Something, and Whatchamacallit-ville?

I'm about to ask the names again—and what's so scary about them—when I hear the rumble of a different voice in the background over the phone. I can't make out the words, but it sounds like a man. A really angry man.

"Um, sorry," the boy says when the other voice stops. "I think I have some bad information. You really don't have another address on a Robin's

Egg Lane in another city?”

Robin’s Egg Lane? Seriously?

“I’m going to hang up now,” I say, because I don’t like this. Maybe this is just a really, really good prank—payback, maybe, from somebody I’ve pranked. It wouldn’t be that weird for Natalie or Braden or Ilka or Hamid or—okay, probably three fourths of the kids at Forsythe Middle School—to arrange for some friend or relative I don’t know to call me up to try to trick me.

But this feels too real. It doesn’t feel like a prank at all, good or bad.

The boy on the other end of the line starts pleading: “No, wait, don’t hang up—are you adopted?”

I jerk the phone away from my ear. And then I stab the button to hang up so hard that it’s a wonder my finger doesn’t break.

## §

I am adopted. It never used to bother me—I guess I bought the line my parents fed me when I was little, about how they chose me, while parents who are nothing but birth parents get stuck with whatever their own genes produce.

My mom even told me once, “It’s like you’re some mystery novel we don’t know the ending of. It’s going to be so exciting to see how you turn out!”

My mom always liked how I have blue eyes and this long thick brownish-blondish hair that seems to grow a couple inches every night. (I donated about a foot of it to this group called Locks of Love last year, and a month later I had the longest hair in my class all over again.) My mom—well, actually, both my parents—have boring brown eyes and thin, wispy, dull-colored hair. If you didn’t know them, you wouldn’t look at them twice.

And, not to brag or anything, but . . . everybody notices me. Everybody’s always laughing at my jokes or talking about my latest prank or begging, *Can you do that really great imitation of the science teacher again?*

I *thought* my parents were always proud of how funny I am.

But lately I haven’t been doing so great in school. (Here’s where Mom would say, *Maybe you should consider doing all your homework, every night?* Except Mom thinks that I already do all my homework every

night.) I do *try*, but seventh grade is harder than sixth grade was. It's starting to feel like there are certain things my brain is made for and certain things where my brain wants to say, "Hey, it's really not like the world's going to end if I don't ever get algebra. Where is it written that every kid in the world has to know math?"

And, of course, both my parents have their PhDs. Their brains were evidently created to understand everything.

Then last month, when Grandma was in town visiting, I heard her ask Mom, "Do you think Daniella is just going through a phase, or is she always going to be that dumpy? I know you don't know where she actually came from, but it's pretty clear it's peasant stock, don't you think?"

I know Grandma didn't know I was listening, and it was actually kind of fun to hear Mom lecturing her about how she had better not say anything to me about my weight, because that's how girls end up getting eating disorders, blah, blah, blah.

But really, Grandma's right. I'm built like a hobbit, short and squat. I don't have the hairy feet, but it is like my toes are deformed or something, with the second toe on each foot overlapping the big toe.

Where would that come from? Did my original family just give me up because they knew how I was going to turn out—a mess?

Maybe it wasn't just a coincidence that the day after Grandma went home to Connecticut, Mom started talking about how, if I wanted to, I could register somewhere to try to get more information about my birth parents.

Didn't Mom think about how that could make me feel like she really just wants to give me back?

## §

I stand by the phone in the upstairs hallway for a long moment.

*You're losing it, I tell myself. One stupid prank phone call that isn't even funny, and you start worrying that your parents want to give you back to the adoption agency?*

"Daniella!" Mom calls up the stairs. "Come down to breakfast! Your father and I have something to tell you before he leaves for work!"

My dad's, like, a computer genius extraordinaire. I understand only about every fifth word that comes out of his mouth. But at least he laughs at my jokes. He just hasn't been around much lately because of some big

work project. He and Mom were both gone for a long weekend, and my other grandma—Dad’s mom—had to stay with me. I was already in bed asleep when my parents got home last night.

So I really do want to say good-bye to Dad before he leaves.

I glance down at what I’m wearing: oversize footie pajamas covered in giant pink bunnies. (They’re ironic, okay? I do know I’m not five years old anymore. But I’m never going to be too old for footie pajamas. They’re too comfortable.) Mom might frown, but Dad won’t care. I’ll go have breakfast now and get changed and ready for school after he leaves.

I half-run, half-slide down the stairs—that’s part of the fun of footie pajamas. In the kitchen Mom and Dad both give me big hugs, but there’s something a little off about how neither one of them will look me in the eye.

“Are we having gourmet Cheerios, or Wheaties à la mode?” I ask. Mom’s kind of a boring cook—I mean, she thinks it’s exotic to have a banana along with our dry cereal. So Dad and I spice things up by making up fancy names for our boring food.

This morning, though, there’s nothing out on the table. Mom and Dad haven’t even poured themselves coffee yet.

“Sit down, sit down,” Dad says. “We have some exciting news.”

You know how it’s always a bad sign when parents repeat themselves?

And when they say something is “exciting”? That’s almost a guarantee that they’re going to try to get you enthused about going to the dentist. Or cleaning the bathroom tile with a toothbrush.

“Okay . . .,” I say cautiously.

“This weekend . . . Well, we *wanted* to tell you what’s been in the works the past few months,” Mom begins. “But . . . we just had to make sure everything was as great as it sounded. . . .”

“We’re getting a puppy?” I ask. “You entered something of mine on *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and they already told you it’s going to win?”

“We’re moving,” Dad says.

For an entire minute it’s like I can’t even understand English anymore. *We’re . . . moving . . .* Dad might as well be speaking underwater, or saying the syllables backward.

“Moving?” I repeat numbly. “You mean, like, we’re going to buy a different house here in Ann Arbor? Why? I like our house!”



I look around the kitchen, which, okay, maybe is a little small. But I've always lived here. My teeth marks from when I was little are on the baseboard; there's a chip in the tile from when I dropped a giant bowl of fruit salad when I was five; every time I look at the silverware drawer, I remember the time Dad pulled on it a little too hard and it came out and all the forks went flying across the room.

If I'm in a bad mood, just looking at the silverware drawer makes me want to laugh.

I look toward the silverware drawer now, and I don't even feel like smiling.

"Actually," Mom says, and she swallows hard. "We're not just moving here in Ann Arbor."

"Your mother and I both got really good job offers from this place called Battelle Institute," Dad says. "In Ohio. We weren't even looking—we weren't planning to move."

"But these are dream jobs," Mom says. She does look kind of dazed.

"Nightmares," I correct her. "This is a nightmare. You want me to leave all my friends? Talia and Oscar and Zana and Rodrigo and Alyssa and . . ."

I can't even list them all. I slump in my chair.

"And, Ohio?" I ask, twisting my face like it hurts just to say the word. Something clicks in my brain. "Is *that* why you went to that B and B in Ohio for your little getaway this weekend?"

"We had to meet with our future bosses. Just to make sure," Dad says. At least he looks a little bit ashamed for keeping secrets from me.

*No—lying, I tell myself. He and Mom lied to me.*

"And we thought we'd just get a feel for what houses might be available in the area," Mom says, and now it sounds like she's apologizing. "We really meant to include you in that whole house-search process, but . . . when you find the perfect house, you've got to jump on it, you know? It's, like, the most wonderful place you could imagine! And the schools are great there, and the price . . . They're practically giving it away!"

"I never dreamed we could afford something like that," Dad agrees. "And the house is already empty, so we should be able to move quickly. . . ."

I am getting cold prickles at the back of my neck. Maybe I would be getting cold prickles anyway, just at the thought of moving, but all I can think of is that weird call I just hung up on.

*Are you sure you aren't moving or planning to move or in the process of* —? the boy asked.

How could he have known what my family was going to do before I did?

"You already bought a new house . . . without even telling me?" I say numbly.

"No, no. We wanted to talk to you before we made the official offer," Mom is saying, and her voice might as well be coming from a million miles away. "But we want to call today. We just fell in love with this place when we saw it yesterday, and we know you will too."

"See for yourself," Dad says, and he's holding out his iPad to me, with a picture of a house on it.

My eyes are so swimmy, I can't get them to focus. The house could be a shack or a mansion—I can't tell. But I can see Mom pointing to words above the picture; I can hear her proclaiming, "Even the street name is lovely. Robin's Egg Lane. Isn't that poetic?"

## §

I don't have a clue what I say to my parents next. I think I scream a little. And then I race back to the upstairs phone. I type in the code that lets me call back the last connection—it's something I learned from doing prank calls. I don't do anything to hide my own number, so the boy answers the phone, "Daniella?"

How does he even know my name? Where did he find my phone number? And most of all, how did he know we were moving?

I start firing questions at him, beginning with one I should have asked the last time: "Who are you?" Then I wrap everything else into: "How did you know?"

There's a pause.

"I—what are you talking about?" the boy asks.

He has no right to sound confused. He started this. He's the one who knows more than he should.

Still, it feels good to scream at him again.

"We *are* moving!" I shout into the phone. "This is so awful! My life is over!"

"I thought you said you weren't," the boy says, and there's caution in his voice. Like maybe now he's afraid of me? Or afraid of what I'm saying? Why?

“I didn’t know!” I scream again, and the only way I can keep from crying is to just go on screaming. “My dad made this big ‘family announcement’ at breakfast—he’s taking a job transfer, and that little ‘getaway’ my parents were on was actually a house-hunting trip! They’re going to make an offer on a house today.”

I think best when I’m talking. And suddenly something breaks over me—an explanation. Somehow I’ve been thinking that the boy’s call was connected to my being adopted, and the weirdness of his knowing we were going to move meant there was something weird about my adoption, or where I came from, or something like that.

But suddenly I see that there might actually be a logical explanation.

It doesn’t make me any less angry at the boy on the other end of the line.

“What are you—the Realtor’s kid?” I snarl.

I can see it perfectly; Mom and Dad were meeting with the Realtor, and for some reason her son was lurking around—maybe the Realtor works out of her home. Anyhow, Mom probably started chatting with this kid, *How old are you? Where do you go to school? What subjects do you like?* Those are the kinds of questions Mom would ask. Then maybe the kid is the type who kisses up to grown-ups, and actually asks, *What about you? Do you have kids? How old is she? What subjects does she like?*

But why in the world would Mom or Dad say, *Yes, we’ve got a kid. She’s adopted?*

I miss whatever the kid says to defend himself. Thinking about what Mom and Dad might have told the kid—or told his mom, when he could hear it—makes me madder than ever.

“That wasn’t funny at all, if that’s your idea of a prank,” I rant at him. “Or were you trying to talk me into thinking I’m going to like the house? I won’t. My parents say it’s ‘wonderful.’ I bet it’s a pit!”

I like screaming at this boy. I can take out my anger over moving, my anger at Mom and Dad being so happy about ruining my life, my anger about their not telling me anything until now.

*They’re not even my real parents*, I think, and honestly, that is the first time that thought has crossed my mind in my entire thirteen years of life.

So do I feel like they’re my real parents only as long as we stay in Ann Arbor? As long as they don’t make me this mad?

I'm opening my mouth to scream something else at this boy, when a different voice surprises me.

"Hold on," this voice says.

*Still a boy, I think. Still about my age, still confused-sounding, maybe not talking quite as close to the phone. . . .*

"Did she say her parents are making an offer on the house *today*? They don't own it already?" Boy #2 asks, and I realize he's asking Boy #1.

Both of them pause for a moment. I pause too, to hear what they're going to say next.

"You're talking about the house on Robin's Egg Lane, right?" Boy #1 asks, and he seems to be saying this straight into the phone. Asking me. There's a sound like he might be unfolding a sheet of paper. "Um, 1873 Robin's Egg Lane? In"—he almost seems to be guessing now—"Liston, Ohio?"

"Yes, yes, that's what you asked me about. Mom and Dad saw it yesterday and just 'fell in love.'" I can hear the bitterness in my voice. Well, why shouldn't I be bitter?

"You say they just saw the house yesterday? For the very first time?" This time it's Boy #2 asking the question. He sounds as worried as Boy #1 has all along, and that freaks me out.

"Yes . . . ," I moan. "Yesterday, for the first time. And just like that they're going to try to buy it today. I think they're having a midlife crisis. They're insane. Why do they have to ruin my life?"

It turns out, screaming didn't actually keep me from crying. I'm wailing now.

"I hate Ohio! I'm going to be miserable there! I—I—" I sniffle, and I decide I've humiliated myself enough. "I can't talk anymore. I'm too upset."

I slam down the phone, rush into my room, and throw myself across my unmade bed.

Mom is there before I've reached for my second Kleenex.

"Daniella!" she says, easing down onto the bed beside me. "This isn't like you! We knew you'd miss your friends, of course, but we really did think you'd be excited, too. Aren't you the one who's always longing for adventure?"

"Moving to Ohio is not an adventure!" I grumble.

But she's making me think.



*Would I be at least a little excited if it hadn't been for that phone call? If I hadn't started thinking that there's some connection between moving and my being adopted?*

Am I the one who's acting crazy? How could the two things be connected?

§

It's lunchtime, and I'm having to comfort my friends. Is it really selfish of me to be glad that several of them are crying over my move?

"I'll come back to visit all the time," I say. "And you can come to visit me, like, every weekend. Mom and Dad say the new house has a giant rec room in the basement. They feel really guilty about making me move, so they'll let me have as many friends as I want come for sleepovers. Maybe you can all come for the entire summer!"

"That would be so awesome," Ilka murmurs through her tears, and I realize I'm doing just what my parents did: making Ohio sound like paradise on Earth.

"And of course we can still text and tweet and Facebook and Skype. . . . I guess moving won't be so bad as long as we can all still stay in touch," I say. "And as long as—"

I stop before I let anything slip about my weird phone conversations this morning. And I can hear Mom saying *This isn't like you* in my head. Normally I tell my friends everything. Normally I would have been making fun of myself for getting so freaked out over what some stupid boys said.

*Your friends know you're adopted*, I remind myself. *They've always known.*

Still. I don't say anything about the phone calls.

§

I'm walking up the driveway after school when I suddenly realize, I can just call those boys back.

I will call them back, and I will be calm. And this time I will get them to explain everything. Boy #1 will admit that he is the Realtor's son and he's really good at pretending to be scared—at pretending that something is life-and-death when it really doesn't even matter.

I will get him to promise to never make phone calls like that again.

Or . . . if they really do know something about my adoption . . . what then? Do I still want to call?

When I walk into the house, Mom is already home from work. And she's unplugging the kitchen phone from the wall.

"What are you doing?" I shriek.

"Checking things off my to-do list," she says. "So far I've turned in my job resignation, gotten price quotes from moving companies, made the official offer on the new house, contacted a Realtor to sell this house, canceled our home phone service—"

"But I need to make a phone call!" I protest.

She gives me an odd look.

"I said 'home' phone service, not 'cell' phone service," she says. "You've been telling me to get rid of the landline for years. Besides, it's been acting weird. This morning it rang once and then just stopped before I could even go over and pick it up."

*Mom thought the phone just stopped ringing this morning, I realize. She doesn't know I answered it. If she heard me talking, she thought I was on my cell. Mom probably thinks it's always just the phone being weird when I answer and pull my pranks.*

So I can't say anything else. I can't ask if there's still any way to look up a number from this morning.

What if Boy #1 and Boy #2 really do know something about my adoption and I never get to talk to them again?

## §

It turns out there's a Boy #3, too.

It's a month later when he calls—a month that I have spent packing and having good-bye parties, and packing and having good-bye parties . . . and then waiting. There's something wrong with that perfect house in Ohio. Somebody who owned it twenty years ago didn't write his will right, and it looks like one of his descendants could pop up after we move in and say, *What are you doing here? This isn't your house! This is my house!*

Mom and Dad don't want that to happen. So we are still in Ann Arbor, waiting for the title search company to track down all that guy's descendants and make sure they'll never try to claim our house.

Who even knew there were such things as title search companies?

Mom and Dad have already started their dream jobs, but they're working from our house in Ann Arbor, around all the boxes. (This is, as Mom keeps saying, *not ideal*. Both Mom and Dad are grumpy.) We could have moved into temporary housing in Liston, Ohio, but they don't want to do that to me. Because what if the house deal falls through and that means I have to change schools twice?

Meanwhile . . . my friends here are still great and all, but sometimes I catch them looking at me like, *Aren't you supposed to be gone by now? Haven't I already spent three weekends going to good-bye parties for you? So leave already!*

It's like I kind of only half-exist in Ann Arbor anymore.

So what I'm saying is, I'm . . . *vulnerable* . . . when Boy #3 calls.

He calls my cell.

It's a Saturday afternoon, and I'm watching cat videos on my computer because we canceled our cable TV three weeks ago, and, well, see above for why I'm not hanging out with any of my friends.

I am so bored.

I see a strange number come up on my phone, and because of Mom and Dad calling back and forth to Ohio a billion times, I recognize the area code.

Whoever's calling me is from Liston, Ohio, or someplace close by.

Honestly, my heart beats a little faster, because I'm thinking, *What if it's those boys again? What if they explain everything this time?*

I swipe my finger across my phone at the same time that I freeze the video on my computer. A cat named Precious cowers at the edge of a cliff that I know she's going to jump from, because I've already seen the video six times.

"Yes?" I say into the phone.

"Is this Daniella McCarthy?" a voice asks.

I can tell right away that it's not Boy #1 or Boy #2, even though I barely talked to them, and that was a whole month ago. This is another boy, though, probably about the same age. His voice is reedier, and maybe he's scared too. But he's trying harder than the other two were to sound tough.

"This is Daniella," I say, and I sound stupid. I sound like some girl who's sitting home alone on a Saturday afternoon watching cat videos and just waiting for some guy—any guy—to call.

“Who are you?” I growl, because I can put on the tough act too. And I learned my lesson the last time. This guy is not getting off the phone without telling me his name.

“Gavin Danes,” the boy says. “Oh, er, I guess it’s okay for you to know my name. But don’t tell anyone.”

So, my asking his name wasn’t in his script? And why is he nervous about saying his name? Is it some state secret?

Should I recognize it?

“I don’t have any reason to tell anyone your name,” I say, trying to butter him up a bit. Though I’m thinking, *Yet. I don’t have any reason to tell anyone your name yet.*

“Okay, then,” Gavin says.

He hesitates, and I’m really tempted to say, *Dude, you’re the one who called me. You might want to start talking.*

But then he says, kind of in a rush, almost as if the words are joined together, “You’re not in Ohio yet, right?”

What is it with people in Ohio being so eager for me to move? Are things so dull there that they’re planning a big “welcome to our state” party for some kid from Michigan they don’t even know? And they need to know when to schedule it?

“No,” I say, trying to sound like it’s all the same to me, and *I don’t care where I live.* “I’m not in Ohio yet.”

“Oh,” the boy says. It is really hard to figure out anything about where he’s going with this from only one syllable. So I decide to throw in a little humor.

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to say, ‘*O-H,*’ and then I say, ‘*I-O*’?” I scold him. This, I’ve learned, is a big thing in Ohio. It’s some cheer for the Ohio State University football team. Personally, I’m starting to wonder if the whole state’s got memory issues. Do they really have to keep reminding themselves how to spell a word that’s only four letters long? “If you say ‘*O*’ and I say ‘*H-I-O,*’ that’s making me do most of the work. Not fair.”

The boy is silent for a moment. Maybe I’ve confused him.

“Did you know your birth certificate is fake?” he asks.

And then he hangs up.

I try to call back. Of course I try to call back. The mysterious Gavin Danes called my cell phone, after all, and so I've got his number. There's no danger that I'll lose track of Boy #3 like I did #1 and #2.

His phone rings and rings and rings, and then it goes to voice mail.

"Hello?" I say after the beep. "What was that? You call and say mysterious things and then just hang up? Don't you know—even if this is just a prank—you've got to work it better than that?"

Then I balance my phone on the edge of my laptop keyboard, because I'm sure this Gavin Danes kid is going to call back right away. While I'm waiting, I click out of Precious the cat waiting to jump off her cliff, and I Google Gavin's name. Nothing that comes up looks like it could be some kid from Ohio.

*So did he lie about his name? Is he hiding something? Why would some kid from Ohio know anything about my birth certificate?*

Why would two other kids from Ohio know that I was moving before I knew myself?

I am so not a Detective Daniella type. I'm pretty sure there are things other people could figure out to look up online that would tell me all about this Gavin. Either one of my parents would probably know how to do that.

I'm not asking them to do any Web research for me.

But I do go into the kitchen, where both my parents are sitting at the table scowling at their work laptops.

"Where's my birth certificate?" I ask.

Mom and Dad both look up, blinking. Sometimes I think they forget there's any world outside their computers. They're like moles surprised by light.

Or maybe they're surprised that I'm asking about my birth certificate? Am I making them suspicious?

"I, uh, wanted to make sure everything's ready for enrolling me in that new school in Ohio," I say. "If we ever go ahead with this move, I mean."

Both Mom and Dad are staring at me now. Mom looks like she's going to say, just like before, *This isn't like you*. And it isn't. I'm not the type to keep track of official papers, any more than I'm the type to keep track of math homework. It's not like me to even remember that official papers would be necessary for starting a new school.

Mom narrows her eyes at me, but all she says is, "Your birth certificate is in the box at the top of the stack by the front door. The box that says, 'To

go in car, not moving van.’”

Maybe I look at her blankly a little too long. Or maybe she remembers how easily I lose things. Because she sighs and says, “I’ll show you.”

We go into the living room together. It used to be a nice place, but now it’s blank walls, two couches, and six stacks of cardboard boxes.

Mom pulls the tape off the top box by the front door, reaches in, and hands me a paper. She holds on to the corner of it, as if I would be capable of losing it even as she’s watching me.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen my birth certificate before. I’ve never even thought about it. I squint at the official-looking document, which says I was born right here in Washtenaw County, Michigan, to Mark and Diane Mc—

*Wait a minute. My birth parents had the same names as my adoptive parents?* I marvel.

No, those *are* my adoptive parents’ names.

“You’ve been lying to me all along, saying I’m adopted?” I gasp, staring at Mom in dismay. “Didn’t you want to claim me?”

Mom screws up her face in confusion. She peers at me, peers at the birth certificate . . . and then her face straightens out.

“This is how birth certificates are done for adopted kids,” she says. “Remember? They put adoptive parents’ names as mother and father because—you know?—we actually *are* your mother and father. We claim you every single day of your life!”

I don’t say anything. Mom goes on.

“I’m sure we talked about this ages ago, when you were five and really curious about being adopted,” she says. “We talked about *everything* about adoption.”

“Well, excuse me for not remembering every little detail from eight years ago,” I say. But I’m thinking, *I know we didn’t talk about why three kids from Ohio would know about my being adopted. I know we didn’t talk about looking for my birth parents back then.*

Mom takes her glasses off and rubs her forehead.

“Daniella, I know we’re all stressed out about this move—or non-move—but is there something else going on? Something you want to tell me?” she asks.

“No,” I say.



She goes back to her laptop in the kitchen. I go back to my laptop in the family room. My phone is still lying on the edge of the keyboard. Gavin hasn't called me back. I call him again instead.

When the voice mail beeps this time, I say, "Why are you avoiding me? And FYI, you didn't tell me anything new. *Every* adopted kid's birth certificate is fake."

§

Gavin calls again two days later.

It's after school, and all my friends are at basketball practice or play practice or orchestra practice or stuff like that. I didn't sign up for any winter trimester activities because, duh, I was supposed to be in Ohio by now. It was supposed to be perfect, how I was going to arrive just in time for all the winter activities to start gearing up there, and I was going to make a million and one Ohio friends that way.

The way everything's working instead is still perfect—perfectly awful. It feels like I'm unmaking all my friendships here, and I've got nothing to replace them with.

So I'm happy when I see Gavin's number on my phone. It's someone to talk to who isn't grumpy Mom or grumpy Dad or an almost un-friend.

*And maybe he really does know something about my adoption? Maybe he really can solve the mystery of who I am?*

"Gavin!" I gush into the phone as soon as I pick up. "Great to talk to you again!"

"I—er—what?" Gavin says on the other end of the line.

I've thrown him off. This is something I'm good at, when I want to be. I flop down onto the couch with a bowl of cheese puffs in my lap.

"Isn't this what every girl dreams of? Some mystery guy calling her?" I tease.

I realize some girls from my school would be bragging, *I haven't even moved to Ohio yet, and already I've got three guys calling me all the time!*

Except Boy #1 and Boy #2 never called me back.

And should I be worried about that whole stranger-danger thing? What if Gavin and Boy #1 and Boy #2 are all fifty-year-old men using those voice modifier things to make me think they're kids?

*None of them has asked me to meet them in some secluded parking lot somewhere,* I remind myself. *They've just asked if I've moved to Ohio yet,*

*which they could find out by driving by my house. Either house. And Boy #1 asked if I was adopted, and Gavin already seems to know that I am. . . .*

Gavin is silent on the other end of the line.

“You’re not a big talker, are you?” I ask in a slightly flirty voice.

“Daniella, I think we might be related,” Gavin says.

Now it’s my turn to be stunned into silence. The bowl of cheese puffs slides from my lap, and there’s time for me to catch it, but I don’t even try.

“I’m adopted too,” Gavin says. “I—”

I hang up on him.

He calls back right away. I answer it.

“What if I don’t want to know?” I ask. I’m holding on to the phone so tightly that its edges dig into my fingers.

“Why’d you answer the phone then?” he asks.

*Because who can resist a ringing phone?* I think, which is the same thing I thought when I had my first conversation with Boy #1.

It’s kind of comforting that this hasn’t changed. I look down for my cheese puffs, because it would be great to just crunch one of them in my mouth and act like I’m still the same old silly, carefree Daniella McCarthy I was before that first phone call weeks and weeks ago. But the cheese puffs are scattered all over the floor now, leaving trails of orange powder behind them on the carpet. They look like psychedelic-colored slugs.

It’s so like me to be messy and clumsy; it’s so like me to look at a spill or a mistake and try to turn it into a funny story.

It would be like me too to go ahead and eat the cheese puffs from the floor, and keep joking with Gavin to keep him from actually telling me anything else.

I don’t reach for the cheese puffs. I don’t make any jokes with Gavin.

“Daniella, are you still there?” he asks.

*Good question,* I think.

Am I still Daniella if I don’t have a million friends around me all the time? Am I still Daniella if I can’t think of anything funny to say?

Am I still Daniella if I find out I’m really supposed to be somebody else?

“How do you know we’re related?” I ask, which is not quite asking about my other identity. “Did you go on some big search for your birth parents? Or did they find you?”

"It's . . . complicated," Gavin says. "There's a lot I don't know either. The way we were adopted—it wasn't normal."

"My parents wouldn't do anything illegal!" I protest. I glance back over my shoulder toward the kitchen, where Mom and Dad are hunched over their laptops again. But they both have earphones in, probably to tune out the noise I was making eating cheese puffs.

"I didn't say your *adoptive* parents did anything wrong," Gavin hedges.

"But my *birth* parents did?" I say. "Our birth parents did?"

I'm guessing here. When he said we were related, did he mean we were brother and sister? Originally?

"I don't know," Gavin says, and he sounds so genuinely miserable that I forget I ever suspected him of lying about his identity. There is no way a fifty-year-old man using voice modifying technology could sound so . . . honest. "I don't know very much about our birth parents."

He's saying "our" too. Does that mean we really are brother and sister? Or is it "our" like, Your two birth parents and my two birth parents—all of them are mysteries?

I don't ask.

"There are people who could answer our questions," Gavin says. "But they hate me. They won't tell me anything. They're kind of mad at me because . . . Well, it's really just a misunderstanding."

"That's too bad," I say. But I'm thinking, *Oh, well. I guess this means I don't have to find out anything else.*

"But maybe . . . maybe they'd tell you," Gavin says, his voice brightening.

*Did he just now think of that, or is that what he's been leading up to all along?* I wonder.

"Huh," I say. "So you're trying to get me to do your dirty work?"

I try to sound like I'm teasing, but I'm not.

"Are you mad at me now too?" Gavin asks, and there's that misery in his voice again. That desperation. I've kind of started picturing him as the male version of me. Wouldn't a brother look like me, if I actually had a brother? Now I'm picturing him as a dejected me-as-a-male, with slumping shoulders and a downturned mouth.

"I'm just not very good with people," Gavin says. "People get mad at me all the time, and it's really not my fault."

“Okay, whatever. Go throw yourself a pity party,” I say, because now he’s just annoying.

*Don’t most girls I know get annoyed with their brothers all the time?*

That thought keeps me from hanging up again. But I’m really close to it.

“I’m messing this up too, aren’t I?” Gavin says. “Look, it’s just a couple of kids you’d have to talk to. Two boys.”

*Two boys, I think. Boy #1 and Boy #2?*

Maybe I’m making too much of a leap. But Boy #1 and Boy #2 already proved that they know too much about me.

*So why didn’t they ever call back, if they wanted to tell me anything else?*

I remember Mom disconnecting the landline phone that very afternoon.

*How much could these boys actually know about me if they don’t even know to call my cell phone number instead?*

I wasn’t born with a cell phone number. Maybe they know a lot about the beginning of my life but not that much about me now?

*Except for the address I was going to move to—before I even knew it myself?*

I’m creeping myself out.

“Why would a couple of kids know anything?” I ask.

“They’re adopted, just like us,” Gavin says. “And their adoptions were messed up, just like ours. But they found out the details. They know about our adoptions too.”

I digest this. What if Boy #1 and Boy #2 were panicked about their own adoptions, not mine?

“I’ve heard there are ways to contact birth parents,” I say cautiously. “Ways to see if they want to be contacted, anyway.”

Gavin snorts. Is he skeptical, or disgusted? I can’t tell.

“None of that would work for us,” he says. “That’s what I meant when I said your birth certificate was fake. *All* the official records about you and me are fake.”

The “you and me” gets to me. Are Gavin and I alike? Am I like Boy #1 and Boy #2 too?

There are so many questions I could ask. I settle for the safest one.

“What are these boys’ names?” I say. I’m not agreeing to anything. I’m just . . . gathering information. What harm could knowing two names do?

“You can’t just call them up,” Gavin says, and now he’s the one sounding panicked. “They won’t tell you anything unless they see you in person.”

*In person . . .*, I think, and my stranger-danger suspicions come back. If he says I have to meet these two boys in a secluded parking lot, I am so hanging up and never answering Gavin’s calls again.

“Did you hear me asking for phone numbers?” I say, and there’s an edge to my voice. “I’m just saying, it’s going to be really weird if I go talk to these guys and I don’t even know their names.”

“Jonah Skidmore and Chip Winston,” Gavin says in a rush.

The names don’t mean anything to me. They could be anyone’s names, anywhere in the world.

They could be made up.

I reach for my laptop, which is on the coffee table, on the other side of the ocean of cheese-puff slugs. It *feels* as though I’m reaching across an entire ocean.

I type “Jonah Skidmore” into a Google search. But I don’t hit enter yet. There could be dozens of Jonah Skidmores in the world. Hundreds. Thousands.

“Where do these two kids live?” I ask Gavin.

“Ohio,” Gavin says, and his voice is full of panic now. Maybe he’s afraid he’s telling me too much. Maybe he’s got some other reason to be scared. “You’re not going to be able to go talk to them in person until you move.”

I type “Liston, Ohio” into the search box after Jonah Skidmore’s name.

“I’ll think about it,” I tell Gavin. “The way things are going, it could be months before we move.”

I don’t know if Gavin wants to talk more or not, but I hang up on him. I’m no computer genius like my parents, but within about five minutes I’ve found a shaky video of some kind of Boy Scout ceremony in Liston, Ohio, last spring. A kid who’s introduced as Jonah Skidmore does the Pledge of Allegiance. I close my eyes and just listen to his voice. I imagine him saying, *Did she say her parents are making an offer on the house today? They don’t own it already?* instead of “. . . and to the republic for which it stands . . .”

It’s bad audio, and it’s been more than a month since I heard the mysterious boys’ voices.

But I am as sure as I possibly can be that Jonah Skidmore is Boy #2.

§

You don't have to do anything until after you move, I tell myself. You don't even have to decide anything about what to do until you move.

And then it's like I've set up this repeating loop in my mind. Those two thoughts are practically all I can think. That and, *What if there's a way that I never have to decide? Like if we don't move? Could I get Mom and Dad to change their minds?*

I start a campaign that very night. Over a dinner that's frozen food heated up in the microwave—because Mom and Dad already packed up most of the kitchen, so we're down to eating just convenience food—I announce, “Did you know that frequent moves can make kids suffer academically? I just found this study online, and, well, what if it's not too late to get your old jobs back and stay here? Couldn't you do that?”

“Daniella, you've never moved before in your life! This is going to be the first time!” Mom counters.

*How about when I moved from wherever my birth parents had me to here?* I think but don't say.

Dad puts down his fork.

“Would you like us to make a solemn vow that we will stay in Liston at least until you've graduated from high school?” he asks.

That is not what I want. I'd rather have them promise that we're not going to stay in Liston long enough for me to meet Jonah Skidmore or Chip Winston.

I push the last limp noodle of my beef Stroganoff back and forth on my plate.

“It's just . . . ever since we started talking about moving, I haven't felt like myself,” I say. “Mom, remember those talks we had before I started sixth grade about how middle school is such a turbulent, difficult time in a girl's life?”

I had a hard time keeping a straight face during all those talks. I did imitations for my friends. I could crack up a whole classroom just by folding my hands together and starting in with my most Mom-ish voice, *Now, Daniella . . .*

Mom's face twitches.

“You seem to be handling it fine,” she says.

I stare down into the leftover Stroganoff sauce and hope I look pale and tragic.

“Maybe I *was*,” I concede. “But now . . . with the move on top of everything else . . . what if I’m not mentally stable enough to move all the way to Ohio? What if it drives me crazy?”

“It’s the waiting that’s driving me crazy,” Dad says. He looks down at his own plate. “Am I really eating frozen food for the fifth night in a row? Does anybody care that I’ve been living out of cardboard boxes for the past three weeks?”

I’m thinking my parents are showing an incredible disregard for my fragile mental health. But suddenly my mom pushes back from the table and grabs her cell phone from the kitchen counter.

“That does it,” she says.

She swipes through a few screens on her cell phone, and then puts it to her ear.

“Joanne?” she says a moment later. “Mark and I have come to a decision. If that title issue isn’t resolved by Friday, we’re forfeiting our deposit and buying a different house. And our main criteria will be how fast we can take possession. We’re moving by the end of this month no matter what!”

Mom hangs up and sits back down.

“There,” she says, as if she’s fixed everything. “We can all be mentally stable again now!”

By trying to stop the move, I’ve just made it happen faster.

## §

Gavin calls me six times the next day. I let every single call go to voice mail. And then I don’t listen to them.

Also, the title search company calls Mom and Dad and says we can buy the house and never worry that anyone else will show up saying it actually belongs to them.

Mom calls this a miracle.

I call it a tragedy.

I want to ask Mom and Dad, *Didn’t you ever worry, adopting me, that maybe someone would show up saying I actually still belong to them?*

Is that what I would find out if I went and met the mystery boys like Gavin wants me to?

We're moving. We're really moving.

Mom and Dad sign the paperwork. The house on Robin's Egg Lane is really ours.

All my Ann Arbor friends say good-bye for the very last time. Every single one of them promises to come and visit, but I don't know if they will or not.

The moving van shows up at our house, the only house I've ever lived in—or, at least, the only one I *remember* living in. After the last box is out, I walk through the empty rooms, and it feels like the house has already forgotten me. It's already the past.

*It sounds like maybe my birth parents haven't forgotten me. It sounds like maybe that part of my past isn't actually over?*

In the car on the way to our new house, I listen to all the voice mails Gavin left me. My phone shows that he's called me twenty times since I last talked to him, but he left only eight messages. It's like he's tried every approach he can think of: pleading, threatening, teasing . . .

*Daniella, those boys are really funny. You'll enjoy meeting them. . . .*

*Daniella, I know you're a nice person. Can't you do this one thing, just as a favor to me?*

*Daniella, do you want to spend the rest of your life wondering who you really are?*

Do I?

In one of his voice mails, Gavin gives me Jonah's and Chip's addresses. When Mom and Dad stop for a coffee break at a McDonald's south of Toledo, I log onto the Internet and look up maps.

Jonah and Chip live on the same street as each other, exactly eight tenths and nine tenths of a mile away from my new house on Robin's Egg Lane.

I'm not a big walker or bicyclist—people built like hobbits generally aren't—but that's close enough that I could get to Jonah and Chip's street without having to ask Mom or Dad to drive me.

I wouldn't ask them to drive me there. But if I could just walk or bike, all by myself . . .

I go to Google Street View and examine the entire route. It's safe, normal suburbia every block of the way. Chip and Jonah's neighborhood looks like the kind of place where little kids play on swing sets in the



backyard, and people put out holiday decorations year-round—not just for Christmas and Halloween, but for Valentine’s Day and the Fourth of July, too.

Jonah’s house even has a picket fence around it.

I remember something I thought way back when I first talked to Boy #1 and Boy #2—Chip and Jonah?—when I wondered if I was in any danger: *Am I going to be attacked by white picket fences? Or people’s perfect yards? Maybe a single blade of crabgrass?*

Am I going to spend my whole life worrying about such silly dangers?

We get back into the car after Mom and Dad’s coffee break, and keep driving.

I couldn’t tell you a single thing we pass between Toledo and Liston.

We get to the new house right behind the moving van. The movers get out and throw open the van doors, revealing everything we own to our new neighbors. One of the moving guys calls out to me as I walk across the front yard: “Hey, kid, you might want to change before you go out in public again around here.”

I look at him blankly.

“Don’t you know you’re in Buckeye territory now?” he asks. “That sweatshirt you’ve got on, it’s like you’re just asking to get beat up!”

He’s talking about my clothes and some silly football rivalry. I didn’t even think about the fact that I pulled on my favorite Michigan sweatshirt this morning.

“All my other clothes are in boxes in your van,” I tell the moving guy. I decide to act like the old, normal, goofy Daniella. “I guess you’re going to save my life by bringing them into the house so I can change!”

He laughs, but his words are still echoing in my head as I walk through my new front door: *Hey, kid, you might want to change . . . change . . . change . . .*

I don’t want to change. I liked being the old, normal, goofy Daniella. The Ann Arbor Daniella.

But Liston Daniella is already different. She’s someone who knows how to lose friends as well as make them. She’s someone who has secrets, someone who hides.

She’s someone who’s afraid to find out who she really is.

I walk through the empty rooms of our new house, and it’s like they’re already haunted—by the calls from Gavin and the other boys, by my own

fears.

I don't want to live in a haunted house.

I don't want to be scared and wondering the rest of my life.

I am silly, not brave; lazy, not take-charge. But I don't want to be *this* kind of Liston Daniella. I don't want to start out this way. I want to be a Liston Daniella who faces her fears, who finds out her own secrets.

I circle back to the living room, where Mom and Dad have already propped open the front door and started telling the movers where everything goes.

"I don't want to get in the movers' way," I tell them. "Is it okay if I go out and look around a little?"

"Um, sure," Dad says. He's distracted, checking off items as the movers bring them in the door.

"Don't go far," Mom says. "We'll call you when everything's in your room and you can come back and start unpacking."

"All right," I say.

I don't ask if Mom thinks eight tenths or nine tenths of a mile is far. I step out the front door and realize that I still have my Michigan sweatshirt on. Maybe it looks like I'm spoiling for a fight.

Maybe I am.

Before, it wouldn't have been like me to be cautious. It wouldn't have been like me to think ahead. But now I make rules for myself. *I won't step foot inside anybody's house. I'll run away if it looks like anything's going to be too dangerous. I won't give away anything I know before they tell me what they know. . . .*

In one of his voice mail messages, Gavin told me to call him as soon as I got to Ohio. He acted like I needed to tell him before I went to see Chip and Jonah; he acted like maybe he could hide in the bushes nearby and keep watch, to make sure I was safe.

I don't know why I should trust Gavin any more than I would trust the other two boys, but I guess it would be good to have somebody know where I'm going.

Just in case.

I lift the phone to my ear as I start down the sidewalk away from our new house—away from the moving van, away from Mom and Dad.

Gavin answers on the first ring.

"I'm in Ohio now," I say. "I'm on my way to see Chip and Jonah."

I hear Gavin gulp.

“Now?” he says.

His voice squeaks. Is it because of puberty or panic?

“Yes,” I say. “Now.”

I don’t know what I’m walking toward, but it feels right. It feels like what I have to do.

This is who I am now.

ALSO BY MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX

THE MISSING

*Found*

*Sent*

*Sabotaged*

*Torn*

*Caught*

*Risked*

THE SHADOW CHILDREN

*Among the Hidden*

*Among the Impostors*

*Among the Betrayed*

*Among the Barons*

*Among the Brave*

*Among the Enemy*

*Among the Free*

*The Girl with 500 Middle Names*

*Because of Anya*

*Say What?*

*Dexter the Tough*

*Full Ride*

*Game Changer*

*The Always War*

*Claim to Fame*

*Palace of Mirrors*

*Uprising*  
*Double Identity*  
*Running Out of Time*  
*The House on the Gulf*  
*Escape from Memory*  
*Takeoffs and Landings*  
*Turnabout*  
*Just Ella*  
*Leaving Fishers*  
*Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*



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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division  
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

[SimonandSchuster.com](http://SimonandSchuster.com)

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The text for this book is set in Weiss.

ISBN 978-1-4424-9821-1 (eBook)

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